

[By Tim Johnson](#)

College attendance is often portrayed these days as a key to membership in the middle class, a point that U.S. Rep. Peter Welch was eager to reiterate Monday.

That's a key, he said, that families of moderate means are increasingly hard-pressed to afford, so he has drafted a bill to that he hopes will ease their burden.

The occasion was a news conference at which Welch announced his intent to sponsor legislation to curb college tuition increases. Speaking at the University of Vermont, he said his College Cost Reduction Act would provide regulatory relief to higher education institutions and authorize the secretary of education to set regulations requiring colleges to subdue cost increases or face penalties.

Joining Welch were two residents of Milton — Chris Lamotte, a father of three children who is contending with college costs for his eldest, and Claudia Abbiati, a UVM senior and first-generation student who said paying for college has been a real struggle.

"The issue of affordability of college is absolutely crushing the middle class," Welch said. He noted that Congress came "within an eyelash" of allowing federally subsidized Stafford loan interest rates to double, to 6.4 percent, which would have added to an already unacceptable cost burden.

Welch said college costs have increased 1,120 percent over the last three decades, five times the rate of inflation.

"Access to higher education is a pillar of entry to the middle class," Welch said. "We have to make it affordable to the middle class."

Welch's bill would establish a task force, comprising government and higher-education officials, that would identify ways to reduce and simplify "unnecessary and cumbersome" regulations that contribute to college-cost inflation. Welch said targeting these regulations emerged as a priority from his past discussions with college administrators.

The task force's recommendations would then be included in implementing legislation that, when enacted, would allow the secretary of education to establish a process obliging institutions to control annual tuition increases.

Among the regulations in question, Welch cited those covering distance-learning education, the integration of postsecondary education data, crime reporting, default-rate calculations and gainful employment. He acknowledged that these and other regulations, which in some cases require additions in college staffing, are a relatively minor cause of overall cost increases. Energy and health care costs are among other inflationary drivers, he said.

The key is the provision that would lead to enforceable limits in tuition increases, Welch said.

"There's got to be some teeth in this at the end of the day," Welch said.

Lamotte said his eldest son, a sophomore at Champlain College, received some financial aid but still had to take out loans, as did his parents, and is working 20-30 hours a week. The total anticipated debt for four years is \$80,000, he said, and he still has two more children to think about.

"It's staggering," Lamotte said. "We're hoping we can keep ahead of it enough — my daughter's in middle school — so that we have enough to give her."

Abbiati said that her laptop died and has to be replaced — an example of the "constant anxiety" she faces over costs.

"It's frightening," she said, adding that her sister is a first-year student at UVM, facing the same challenges.

"I hope something can be done to help my sister when I'm done," she said.